

## GW Fuego Latin Dance Group: Representation without the Identification

Kimi Yonamine

### Introduction

According to Kay Kauffman Shelemay in *Soundscapes*, “Dance invites anyone to participate who can master its basic movements, whatever their cultural background, social experience or musical expertise” (2001). In support to Shelemay’s argument, I believe that dance is an activity that any individual can participate in to understand the soundscape behind the movements to a rhythm. Through my case study on the Latin dance group, GW Fuego, I argue that dancers do not need a cultural connection to represent dances of a culture other than their



Figure 1: GW Fuego Dance Group 2018

own. The presence of GW Fuego at the George Washington University represents the Latino culture through their performance of street Latin dances, such as merengue, bachata and salsa. Their purpose is to increase Latino cultural awareness through music and dance, group

unity, and the coordination of events. For my fieldwork on GW Fuego, I explored the connection between the Latino culture and the dancers. My fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews, documenting events and participant observation at their events and practices. I took the perspective of an outsider to view the larger impact of GW Fuego on the Latino culture at the George Washington University.

### History of GW Fuego

To understand the impact of GW Fuego, I began with interviews of former dancers and research of the group's origin. According to a Fuego alum from 2010, GW Fuego began as an Afro-Latino Dance Group that performed to Afro and Latino beats found in salsa and merengue. They performed at student events like the Multicultural Services Center Block Party and the Organization of Latino Americans Students'

*Noche de Cultura* (Night of Culture). In 2013, the group was brought back to campus, but it was renamed to a 'Latin dance group'. The group stopped performing to Afro beats and began performing to salsa, merengue and bachata. The group was recognized for the remix of popular English songs to Latin rhythms to connect to all college students. Today, GW Fuego remains as



Figure 2: Excellence in Student Life Awards Dancers in GW Fuego took home the Performance Group of the Year Award after winning the audience vote at the Excellence in Student Life Awards.

the only Latin dance group on campus that performs choreographies of salsa, merengue and bachata. The group is made up of ten undergraduate students with all levels of dance experience and cultural background. In addition to performing, they host free salsa and bachata lessons and collaborate with other dance groups to promote culture on campus through the performing arts.

### Fieldwork Methods

My fieldwork consisted of interviews with two GW Fuego dancers, one informational email with a former Fuego alum, observation and participation at their salsa lessons, eight dance practices, their annual dance showcase *Ven Bailalo con Fuego* and their performance at *Noche de Cultura* and the 2018 *Excellence in Student Life Awards* (See Figure 2). Because I have been part of the group since the year 2015, it is important to note my positionality in approaching this subject. I

have a Latino background and I am familiar to the organization's mission, structure and prior interactions with the members. However, my insider's point of view was a benefit to the fieldwork because I had access to records and files. It was easy to set aside my insider perspective when examining the cultural connection between the dancers and the music because as a dancer I perform with an objective and do not reflect on the conceptual significance of the performance. I examined the role of culture through both an insider and outsider perspective during a limited period of time.

### Evidence

During my participant observation at the salsa lessons, I gathered from my field notes that the participants were from all cultural backgrounds. As the participants introduced themselves with their names, where they are from, where they are 'from-from' (the culture they identify with) and their experience with dance, many of the participants identified with their family's cultural



Figure 3: Ari Albalak and his dance partner

background. They all identified with various backgrounds and levels of dance experience, but they all connected with the desire to learn the Latin dance style of salsa. When the participants would perform the salsa steps without any trouble, they demonstrated pride performing the steps they had picked up during the two-hour lesson. The dancers built a connection to the salsa's soundscape. There was no visible correlation between the participants who learned the dance steps and their cultural background. For the interview component of my fieldwork, I

conducted an interview on a dancer who had a connection to the Latino culture, Diana Villegas, and on a dancer who did not identify with the Latino

background, Ari Albalak. The results from the interviews allowed me to form my argument because I was able to make comparisons between Villegas and Albalak's relationship to the Latino culture through dancing for GW Fuego. Villegas, identified her cultural identity as Colombian-Ecuadorian and joined Fuego during her freshman year, where she realized the diversity within the Latino culture. In response to non-Latino dancers, she believed that dance is universal and every individual can relate to it differently. Those that identify as Latino can embrace their culture and those who do not identify as Latino can learn about the culture. She believes it is great for non-Latinos to represent the culture as long as they are respectful about it. Albalak, an Israeli American, joined GW Fuego in 2016 and said that it helped him develop a connection to the Latino culture. During the performances and practices, I observed the interaction of dancers with the rhythm and movement of the Latin music.

### **Conclusion: Results and Reflection**

The diverse team of GW Fuego demonstrated that there is no need for the dancer to have a cultural connection to the Latino culture in order to engage and connect to it. The representation of the Latino culture by the performance of a non-Latino is as important as the performance by a Latino. When dancers represent a culture with respect and appreciation, the culture behind the soundscape is communicated to the viewers. Taking the lens of an anthropologist allowed me to see Latin dancing with less of an objective approach into a conceptual approach of performing Latin dance to represent the culture. As each dancer interacted with Latin music differently, it allowed me to realize the importance of the dancers in the transfer of culture. I learned that GW Fuego cultivates the Latino culture through its dancers. The dancers who identify as Latinos are able to connect with their origins and those who do not identify as Latinos can build a connection to the culture.

Visuals and other documents



Figure 4: GW Fuego performing at the 2018 Excellence in Student Life Awards Ceremony



Figure 5: GW Fuego accepting the award for Best Performing Group at the 2018 Excellence in Student Life Awards Ceremony

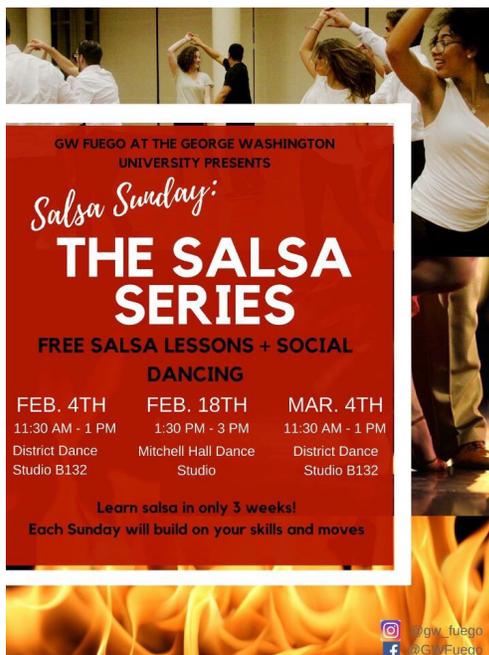


Figure 6: Salsa Series Advertisement



Figure 7: Showcase Advertisement

Figure 8: Interview Questions

**Interview A) Interview Questions for Dancer Diana Villegas**

1. How long have you been in GW Fuego for?
2. What made you join GW Fuego?
3. Do you identify with the Latino culture? If not, what is your culture?
4. How do you think Latino culture has been represented through GW Fuego?
5. Has dancing in a Latin dance group changed your perspective of the Latino culture?
6. How do you feel about the dance members who do not identify with the Latino culture that are representing the culture through dance?
7. Do you think there are differences in the meaning of Latin dance according to the person's background?
8. What does being part of the team mean to you?

**Interview B) Interview Questions for Dancer Ari Albalak**

1. How long have you been in GW Fuego for?
2. What made you join GW Fuego?
3. Do you identify with the Latino culture? If not, what is your culture?
4. How do you think Latino culture has been represented through GW Fuego?
5. Has dancing in a Latin dance group changed your perspective on the Latino culture?
6. Do you think you have developed a connection to the Latino culture through being part of GW Fuego?
7. How do you feel about representing a different culture?
8. What does being part of the team mean to you?